

## **Bringing the leader back in:**

### **Why, how, and when leadership empowerment behavior shapes coworker conflict**

#### **Abstract**

With the diffusion of team-based work organizations and flatter organizational hierarchies, many leaders empower employees to perform their work. Empowerment creates an interesting tension regarding coworker conflict, enhancing trust and giving employees more autonomy to prevent conflict, while also increasing workload and the potential for coworker conflict. Recent conflict research has focused on how characteristics of individuals, groups, and tasks contribute to conflict among coworkers. We extend this work by exploring the role of leader empowerment behavior (LEB) in influencing coworker conflict. Our model integrates research on LEB and coworker conflict to help organizations manage coworker conflict effectively. To test our model at the workplace level, we utilize data drawn from matched surveys of leaders and employees in 317 workplaces. We find that LEB relates negatively to relationship and task conflict through affective and cognitive trust in leaders. We further find that LEB relates negatively to relationship and task conflict through reduced workload, but only when employees have a clear role description. In contrast, if employees have unclear roles, LEB has a U-curve relationship with workload: a moderate level of LEB reduces workload, but a high level of LEB increases workload, in turn increasing coworker conflict. Finally, relationship conflict has a direct negative effect on task performance, while task conflict has an indirect negative effect through relationship conflict.

**Keywords:** coworker conflict, leadership empowerment behavior, affective trust, cognitive trust, task performance, workload, role clarity, social exchange theory, cost of empowerment

On average, US employees spend around 2.8 hours per week dealing with workplace conflict (CPP, 2008). This estimate equates to around US\$359 billion in paid hours (based on average hourly earnings of \$17.95) and 385 million working days lost per year (CPP, 2008), representing a significant loss of productivity for organizations and the national economy. A more recent study in New Zealand (FairWay, 2014) found that around 25% of employees engage in conflict in their workplaces, distracting them from performing their actual tasks. Some researchers have highlighted that coworker conflict has become more prevalent as a consequence of the diffusion of flatter organizational hierarchies and greater interdependencies among coworkers (Jehn, 1997). Integrating this organizational development into their leadership and management practices, many leaders have sought to empower their employees in their work (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015).

Empowering employees by providing them with autonomy and decision-making authority has been identified as one key resource for team and organizational effectiveness (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015; Koberg et al., 1999). Regarding coworker conflict, “leadership empowerment behavior” (LEB) creates an interesting tension (Chen et al., 2011). On one hand, LEB creates trust among employees, signaling that leaders are confident that their employees are capable of handling challenging interpersonal interactions and relationships with coworkers (Chen et al., 2007; Seibert et al., 2011). The increased autonomy and control should help employees to prevent coworker conflict. On the other hand, LEB increases possibilities for coworker conflict to occur, because employees need to manage interpersonal interactions on their own and may experience additional workload (Cheong et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2017).

Prior LEB research has conceptualized LEB as a group-level stimulus and has provided evidence that it plays a critical role in shaping the workplace within which coworkers interact and perform tasks (Avery et al., 2013). LEB also shapes task structure

(e.g., autonomy, task interdependence, task meaningfulness, and decision-making participation) (Ahearne et al., 2005; Spreitzer, 1995), which has already been identified as an important correlate of task and relationship conflict (De Wit et al., 2012). This research therefore provides a natural link to the study of the relationships of LEB with coworker relationship and task conflict (Zhao et al., 2019). As the social and structural environment of a workplace seems to be shaped in some part by LEB, it is important to integrate research on coworker conflict with research on LEB.

Prior coworker conflict research has focused on the examination of conflict effects on numerous workplace outcomes (De Dreu, 2008). This conflict research has generally distinguished between task and relationship conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Malterich et al., 2018). Prior research has found that relationship conflict has harmful effects on individual experiences at work, group dynamics and performance, emergent states among group members and coworkers, and organizational outcomes (De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn et al., 2012). Notwithstanding this, task conflict has also been found to have positive effects under specific conditions (Bradley et al., 2012, 2013; De Wit et al., 2012). These findings have driven a growing interest in understanding why, how, and when conflict arises among coworkers.

As this line of research has developed, scholars have turned their attention to understanding the antecedents of conflict to provide recommendations to organizations of how dysfunctional coworker conflict can be managed, reduced, or even avoided. In doing so, the research has highlighted the role of an expanding number of individual, group, and contextual factors that are likely to generate conflict among coworkers (Korsgaard et al., 2008). At the individual level, factors such as personality traits (Bono et al., 2002), dissimilarity relative to group members (Tepper et al., 2011), conflict management styles (Tjosvold & Su, 2007), and a range of demographic attributes, such as age (Ng & Feldman,

2010), have been found to be associated with coworker conflict. At the group level, research has reported predictors such as: surface-level (Pelled et al., 1999) and deep-level diversity (Seong & Choi, 2014), group personality (Bradley et al., 2013), group efficacy (Ayoko & Chua, 2014), and group emotion regulation (Curseu et al., 2012). Additionally, contextual factors such as psychological safety climate (Bradley et al., 2012), goal interdependence (Wong et al., 2017), and task and incentive arrangements (Mooney et al., 2007) have also been found to correlate with coworker conflict.

In this paper, we expand research on coworker conflict by analyzing the role of LEB in shaping why, how, and when conflict among coworkers emerges. This allows us to make three main contributions. First, we integrate leadership research into coworker conflict research. Leadership and conflict research have proceeded independently from each other. Scholars and practitioners have recognized the importance of leadership in general for effective conflict management (Tjosvold et al., 2014; Zaccaro et al., 2001; Zhao et al., 2019). However, work that explicitly examines the potential impact that leaders have on shaping coworker conflict is surprisingly limited (Gelfand et al., 2012; Redmond et al., 2016).

Second, we address the recent call from conflict scholars to understand why and how leaders influence coworker conflict (Zhao et al., 2019). One reason for the lack of empirical research about leadership and conflict has been the failure to develop a more integrative theoretical framework that specifies the mechanisms through which leaders might shape coworker conflict (Zhao et al., 2019). The more limited examination of the role of leaders also reflects the methodological limitations of much conflict research, which often uses self-managed student teams to examine antecedents and consequences of conflict. We address this issue and propose a model that explains why and how LEB impacts coworker conflict and, consequently, employees' task performance. Consistent with prior research, we consider affective and cognitive trust as social "exchange deepeners" (Colquitt et al., 2012: 2; see also

Schaubroeck et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2013) and key mechanisms that explain how LEB affects coworker conflict. From this social exchange perspective, we posit that LEB signals to employees that their leaders are willing to make themselves vulnerable and that leaders trust their employees (Chen et al., 2007). Drawing on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), we expect employees to exchange LEB for improved performance. More specifically, we argue that employees are likely to reciprocate LEB by developing affective and cognitive trust in their leaders – which in turn reduces their engagement in dysfunctional behaviors such as coworker conflict – to improve task performance (Figures 1 and 2).

Our third contribution is to the body of research examining the dark side of LEB (Cheong et al., 2016, 2019; Lee et al., 2017). Based on research about the costs of empowerment and autonomy (Langfred, 2000; Langfred & Moye, 2004), we investigate the role of employees' workload as a key mechanism linking LEB and coworker conflict. We posit that LEB is likely to increase employees' perceptions of workload, possibly creating conflict, tension, and stress among employees (Cheong et al., 2016, 2019; Langfred, 2000; Langfred & Moye, 2004; Lee et al., 2017). With greater LEB, employees must structure their own tasks, schedule their own work, make their own decisions, and manage their interpersonal relationships with coworkers, possibly increasing employees' workloads and cognitive loads (Langfred & Moye, 2004; Lee et al., 2017). We argue that the beneficial effects of LEB can only be realized if employees have clear role descriptions. Without clearly defined roles, the greater autonomy and control provided through LEB can create a lack of direction for employees (Mills & Ungson, 2003).

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Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here  
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## **Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development**

### **Leadership Empowerment Behavior and Trust**

Our focus on the workplace-level conceptualization of employee attitudes and perceptions is in line with LEB research, which considers LEB to be a multilevel construct (e.g., Lee et al., 2018; Spreitzer, 2007). We apply a summary index model (Chen et al., 2004) to represent LEB at the workplace level. A summary index model indicates the central tendency of the employees (Fischer, 2008) but does not assume that LEB perceptions are shared among employees. High shared agreement is unlikely to occur on this construct, because LEB perceptions may vary by supervisor and by employee – particularly in larger workplaces like many in our sample. This is in line with the notion of “differentiation” in leader-member exchange relationships, whereby leaders share somewhat varied social relationships across employees (cf. Liden et al., 2006; Liden et al., 1997). Thus, acknowledging that perceptions of LEB may similarly vary considerably within the workplace, we are still interested in the *average* level as a comparison point *between* workplaces. This average LEB level is likely influenced by common organization-level policies, accepted practices, culture, and even senior leadership, but not necessarily to the degree of standardization across the whole of the workplace. Through such an approach, we can parsimoniously capture the complex reality and hierarchy that exists in many organizations (see also Menges et al., 2011). Research has operationalized the LEB construct as consisting of four sub-dimensions: (1) enhancing the meaningfulness of work; (2) fostering participation in decision making; (3) expressing confidence in high performance; and (4) providing autonomy from bureaucratic constraints (Ahearne et al., 2005; Spreitzer, 1995). LEB has been shown to be a critical resource for employee performance (Frazier & Fainshmidt, 2012; Lee et al., 2017), especially in the context of teamwork (Avery et al., 2007).

Trust is defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action

important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other part” (Mayer et al., 1995: 712). In this paper, we use the term “trust” as it pertains to employees’ trust in their leaders, which is an important predictor of employee performance (Downey et al., 2015; Jiang & Propst, 2015; Zhu et al., 2013). Trust in one’s leaders therefore refers to the willingness of an employee to be vulnerable to the leaders’ actions, based on the positive expectation that leaders will protect and act in line with employees’ interests. Trust research further differentiates between affective and cognitive forms (Colquitt et al., 2012; Lewis & Wiegert, 1985; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Affective trust in the leader implies that employees perceive an emotional bond with their leader (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; McAllister, 1995). In contrast, cognitive trust in the leader implies that employees perceive their leader as reliable, competent, and responsible (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; McAllister, 1995). Thus, employees trusting in their leaders may do so because they perceive the leader as emotionally tied to them (affective trust) and/or because they perceive the leader as capable and otherwise motivated to look out for their interests (cognitive trust).

We argue that LEB is likely to induce both affective and cognitive trust, leading to beneficial employee attitudes and behaviors. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) provides a solid theoretical foundation for our expectation. Social exchange theory describes the exchange of economic and socio-emotional resources between employees and leaders (Blau, 1964). Social exchanges form the bases of relationships that are characterized by mutual obligations and expectations that rewards will be reciprocated in the future (Blau, 1964).

Social exchange differs from pure economic exchange in that “furnishing benefits to others may lead to the development of bonds of fellowship with them” (Blau, 1964: 113). With this notion of reciprocity in mind (see also Gouldner, 1960), we argue that LEB signals to employees a commitment to an ongoing relationship between them and their leaders,

fostering those “bonds of fellowship,” thereby promoting affective trust in the workplace. LEB entails the provision of autonomy and decision-making authority to employees. This is likely to elicit in employees the impression that leaders trust employees and care about their well-being and job, promoting “feelings of personal obligation, gratitude, and trust” among employees (Blau, 1964: 94). From the perspective of employees, LEB is considered a key resource that is exchanged as part of a collective social exchange relationship between them and their leaders (Li et al., 2017; Lorinkova & Perry, 2017). LEB is therefore likely to motivate employees within the workplace to reciprocate leaders’ contributions, so that they may discharge the obligation and maintain effective social exchange relationships (Blau, 1964). LEB may also indicate to employees that their leaders invest effort and time to build relationships with employees. These employees are likely to believe they have as a group a strong emotional bond with their leaders, characterized by mutual trust (Chen et al., 2007; Hassan et al., 2013).

In addition to its potential to evoke emotional bonds, LEB has concrete effects on how the work environment and tasks are structured (Ahearne et al., 2005; Avery et al., 2013), as noted previously. LEB provides employees with key resources, such as autonomy, and increases their self-efficacy (Ahearne et al., 2005; Srivastava et al., 2006), helping them to conduct their tasks and duties and achieve their goals. LEB is likely to signal important aspects of the leaders’ character to employees, which leads to cognitive trust (Ferrin & Dirks, 2002). Specifically, LEB signals that leaders are capable of delegation and have confidence that employees have the skills and motivation necessary for their work (Hassan et al., 2013). Moreover, because of this emphasis on delegation, leaders embracing LEB likely signal a belief that the pursuit of employees’ goals is generally aligned with the achievement of organizational goals. These signals are likely to constitute rational expectations among employees that the leaders have their interests in mind, independent of any affective bonds.



Thus, cognitive trust is likely to develop where leaders engage in LEB. Based on these arguments, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 1: LEB is positively related to (a) affective and (b) cognitive trust.*

### **Leadership Empowerment Behavior and Workload**

Consistent with recent research about the dark side of LEB (Cheong et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2017), we consider additional workload as a potential dysfunctional effect of LEB and a key mechanism to explain competing LEB effects on coworker conflict. A high average level of workload means that employees believe that their workloads are particularly demanding, that employees are expected to do too much, and that employees must work extremely hard (Patterson et al., 2005). As we have noted, LEB can have dysfunctional effects in terms of an increased workload for employees. Too much LEB entails an increased workload for employees, because employees now have additional responsibilities and need to make decisions on their own (Cheong et al., 2016, 2019; Langfred, 2000). This increased workload relates to a cognitive distraction (Langfred & Moye, 2004; Lee et al., 2017) and may bring employees to engage in more coworker conflict. On the other hand, one could argue that LEB reduces the workload of employees, because they can work more effectively due to increased autonomy and freedom (Chen et al., 2007; Seibert et al., 2007; Srivastava et al., 2006). This in turn should help employees to prevent the emergence of conflict with coworkers.

To reconcile these contradictory predictions, recent research has started to investigate curvilinear LEB effects on employee performance (Cheong et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2017). Lee and colleagues (2017) integrated the “too-much-of-a-good-thing” proposition (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013) and hypothesized that LEB should have beneficial effects on employees’ task performance, but only up to a point, after which LEB becomes dysfunctional for task

performance. Lee and colleagues' (2017) study supported their hypothesis, reporting a reversed U-curve relationship between LEB and employees' task performance.

Therefore, we argue that while some amount of LEB should be beneficial and reduce employees' workload, too much LEB will be associated with growing ambiguity about workload expectations and, consequently, higher perceived levels of workload for employees.<sup>1</sup> Based on this line of argument, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 2: LEB has a U-curve relationship with workload. Specifically, employee perceptions of workload are lower under moderate levels of LEB and higher under low and high levels of LEB.*

### **The Moderating Role of Role Clarity**

Research on empowerment and autonomy indicates the effects of LEB are likely to depend on organizational contextual factors (Cheong et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2017; Langfred & Moyer, 2004). To reconcile the potential opposing effects of LEB on workload, we consider the moderating role of role clarity. Research on the cost of autonomy has considered formalization at the organizational level as a boundary condition for the effects of autonomy and empowerment (Adler & Borys, 1996; Langfred & Moyer, 2004). The focus was on organizational structure, neglecting the clarity of employees' role and job descriptions. We argue that clarity regarding employees' roles is a more proximal moderator of LEB's effects. Prior research has shown that clear job and role descriptions have beneficial effects on employees' attitudes, whereas unclear job and roles descriptions interfere with performance and helping behavior (Eatough et al., 2011; Gilboa et al., 2008). Research based on the job-demands-resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001) further

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<sup>1</sup> Our action editor and reviewers highlighted the potential of taking this line of reasoning for developing this hypothesis. We thank them for their constructive comments and for encouraging us to be transparent in noting the *post hoc* nature of considering workload in this way.

suggests that clear job descriptions and roles might be important job resource for employees, buffering dysfunctional workplace dynamics and helping employees to cope effectively with job demands (Adamovic, 2018).

Role clarity includes a detailed description of employees' duties and goals (Sun, Aryee, & Law, 2007). Where employees are expected to perform in a role that has a clear, up-to-date description, they are more likely to perform as they know what is expected from them and how they should conduct their tasks (Dierdorff & Rubin, 2004; Katz & Kahn, 1978). We argue that beneficial LEB effects can only unfold when employees have clear roles. In the context of greater LEB, more autonomy and control can create a risk that employees lack direction (Mills & Ungson, 2003), as they do not know which goals they must achieve and what tasks to prioritize. To compensate for this lack of direction, it is important that organizations provide clear role descriptions to their employees (Vecchio, 2003).

In contrast, unclear roles create uncertainty and anxiety for employees (Breugh & Colihan, 1994; Rodell & Judge, 2009). In this case, employees cannot benefit from a large amount of LEB. A limited increase in LEB might be beneficial, as the limited autonomy and freedom can be handled by employees up to a certain point. However, too much LEB could bring the employee to feel overworked, particularly when lacking sufficient guidance or clarity around the role (Lee et al., 2017). Thus, employees are left without sufficient direction about the goals and tasks they should approach. This, in turn, is likely to bring employees to perceive a higher workload resulting from LEB (Li & Bagger, 2008).

In sum, we argue that LEB has only beneficial effects regarding workload and coworker conflict when employees' role descriptions are clear. In contrast, when role descriptions are unclear, too much LEB might lead to perceptions of increased workload.<sup>2</sup>

*Hypothesis 3: Role clarity moderates the relationship between LEB and workload.*

*Under high levels of role clarity, LEB reduces workload, while under low levels of role clarity, LEB exhibits the U-curve relationship with workload described in Hypothesis 2.*

### **Trust and Coworker Conflict**

Conflict research has traditionally distinguished between two conflict types: task conflict and relationship conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Tekleab et al., 2009). Relationship conflict relates to interpersonal incompatibilities between coworkers, while task conflict relates to disagreements about tasks and goals between coworkers (Jehn, 1995). Although researchers have proposed an expanded typology including other forms of conflict (e.g., Behfar et al., 2010; Song et al., 2006), most research has generally focused on these two core dimensions (Maltarich et al., 2018; Tekleab et al., 2009), and we adopt this more parsimonious two-dimensional model for the present research.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) provides an explanation of why affective and cognitive trust reduces relationship and task conflict among coworkers. We view trust as an exchange deepener (Colquitt et al., 2012) at the workplace level, indicating the strength of the collective social exchange relationship between employees and leaders (Chua et al., 2008). We argue that affective and cognitive trust may help workplaces to increase performance by reducing coworker conflict. Previous research at the individual level suggests that employees are highly motivated to carry out their tasks and

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to perform well if they have affective and cognitive trust in their leaders (Colquitt et al., 2012).

The development of affective trust, characterized by emotional bonds between employees and leaders, provides a strong sense that leaders value and respect their employees (Tyler & Lind, 1992). Leaders who induce affective trust may elicit a sense of reciprocity in employees (Chua et al., 2008; Eisenberger et al., 1987). To reciprocate the perceived affective bond offered by the trusted leader, employees are likely to feel obligated to exercise and display similar trustful attitudes and behaviors in the workplace. It is possible that this reciprocal behavior is not only directed to the leaders, but also crosses over to coworkers (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). We therefore argue that, as a form of reciprocity, employees will be motivated to maintain higher quality relationships with coworkers, minimizing relationship and task conflict. In sum:

*Hypothesis 4: Affective trust in leaders is negatively associated with (a) relationship and (b) task conflict.*

Competent, reliable, and responsible leaders facilitate the work of employees and help them to develop their professional skills (McAllister, 1995). Accordingly, employees, who have cognitive trust in their leaders are likely to be motivated to maintain the relationship by reciprocating these trustful attitudes and behaviors of their leaders (Chua et al., 2008), regardless of whether there exists any potentially motivating affective bond. Employees will therefore be motivated to increase their work efforts and work quality as a way to fulfill their social obligations and maintain the trustful relationship (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Additionally, apart from the spillover effects of affective trust mentioned above, this reciprocation likely also includes interacting with coworkers in a more cooperative and supportive way. Such behavior is likely to signal the employee's own trustworthiness in an effort to maintain a trustful relationship with the leader. Instead of engaging in dysfunctional

relationship and task conflict with coworkers, employees are therefore likely to avoid conflict or to manage it constructively. In this way, employees will be able to focus on their work and goals to pay back their leaders' trustful attitudes and behaviors. Thus, we expect that:

*Hypothesis 5: Cognitive trust in leaders is negatively associated with (a) relationship and (b) task conflict.*

### **Workload and Coworker Conflict**

We argue that high workload levels should have dysfunctional effects on coworker conflict. Workload is considered a job stressor, with adverse consequences for employees' well-being (Spector et al., 1988). Stressed employees typically interpret their environment through a negative lens (Lang et al., 2011). As stress creates negative emotions (Molines et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2004), which often characterize relationship conflict (Ren & Gray, 2009; Spector & Fox, 2005), workload should be associated with a higher level of relationship conflict. Consistent with this reasoning, prior research demonstrates that workload often makes it emotionally more difficult for employees to manage their interpersonal relationships with coworkers (Greenglass et al., 2003). As a result, under conditions of high stress, interactions between employees are expected to be less harmonious, characterized by interpersonal tension and disagreements. Moreover, high workloads mean employees have less time to effectively manage relationships with their coworkers (Jex & Thomas, 2003), possibly leading employees to neglect maintenance of their relationships altogether. Consequently, we would expect that discretionary behaviors decrease as employees allocate scarce time to complete their formal tasks, rather than invest in relationship maintenance.

Further, high workloads consume employees' cognitive resources (Tucker et al., 2009), which may be essential to focus and accuracy in work tasks (Baumeister et al., 2007), as well as in decision making (Gonzalez, 2005). If high-workload employees are not able to

fulfill their tasks or make decisions effectively, we expect disagreements and conflict with coworkers to arise surrounding any shared or interdependent tasks at the workplace. In sum, based on these two lines of reasoning, we expect that:

*Hypothesis 6: Workload is positively associated with (a) relationship conflict and (b) task conflict.*

### **Coworker Conflict and Employees' Task Performance**

Jehn (1995) hypothesized different implications for workplace outcomes of each of the two conflict types typically examined by team scholars. According to Jehn's model, relationship conflict typically induces the negative aspects of conflict in terms of personality clashes and negative emotions, whereas task conflict captures the positive aspects of conflict in terms of task-related discussions and exchanging different ideas. The possible positive role of task conflict is still one of the most heated debates in the workplace conflict literature (Bradley et al., 2012, 2013; De Dreu, 2006; Tjosvold, 2008).

The overwhelming conclusion from prior studies is that relationship conflict invariably has negative consequences for employee performance (De Wit et al., 2012; Seong & Choi, 2014). This effect has generally been explained from an information processing perspective (Carnevale & Probst, 1998): relationship conflict consumes cognitive energy and resources, which are then lacking to accurately complete tasks. Consistent with this theorizing, we argue that employees in workplaces characterized by more relationship conflict are likely to be more distracted from their actual tasks than employees in workplaces with less relationship conflict. Instead of trying to achieve performance goals, employees are pre-occupied with managing relationship conflict with coworkers and protecting themselves from the possible negative consequences of this conflict. Time and energy are thereby displaced from productive tasks that contribute to task performance. The development of different perspectives and opinions within the workplace may also be limited, causing

ineffective information exchange among coworkers and limiting the number of ideas that serve as inputs into decision-making. This should have a direct negative impact on employees' task performance (De Dreu, 2008). We therefore acknowledge extant theoretical and empirical work in this area, and we build on the basic hypothesis that:

*Hypothesis 7: Relationship conflict is negatively associated with task performance.*

In contrast to these negative consequences of relationship conflict, many researchers argue that task conflict can have beneficial effects on employees' performance (Bradley et al., 2012, 2013; Jehn, 1997). Task conflict may provide team members with multiple perspectives on problems, helping them to develop more ideas and solutions and often leading to higher quality decision-making. By itself, the development of decision-making alternatives may have positive consequences for workplace outcomes as it increases learning and how problems associated with tasks are understood and resolved (Simons & Peterson, 2000). The existence of task conflict is also likely to interfere with groupthink (Pelled et al., 1999). Working in high task conflict conditions, employees are likely to be more motivated to challenge existing and outdated opinions, creating the basis for high task performance. Importantly, conflict researchers have provided empirical evidence for this positive task conflict view (e.g., Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Pelled et al., 1999). We therefore acknowledge this foundational logic that the task-related disagreements and debates in workplaces are related to useful information and knowledge exchanges among coworkers, increasing employees' understanding of the tasks and improving task performance. This reasoning is reflected in our fourth hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 8: Task conflict is positively associated with task performance.*

However, we should note that empirical work in this area has not always been consistent in finding positive effects for task conflict on employee performance (De Dreu, 2008; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). A meta-analysis by De Wit et al. (2012) reports that the



overall impact of task conflict is neither negative nor positive. Recent research further suggests the relationship between task conflict and performance is more complex than previously expected. Importantly, for our understanding of the likely consequences of task conflict, there is some evidence for detrimental indirect effects of task conflict on performance, transmitted through relationship conflict (Korsgaard, et al., 2008; Schaeffner et al., 2015).

Based on these findings, we expect that task conflict has an indirect negative association with employees' task performance through relationship conflict. Prior conflict research has already demonstrated that task conflict may develop into relationship conflict (Choi & Cho, 2011; Mooney et al., 2007; Schaeffner et al., 2015). Where employees' task-related opinions and ideas are often challenged by coworkers, the employees may develop general feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration (see also Lau & Murnighan, 2005; Langfred, 2007). They may also interpret high levels of task conflict as indicative of a workplace environment in which it is common for employees to attack their coworkers' personal competence. Employees in high task conflict workplaces may therefore feel that coworkers challenge their abilities and knowledge (Choi & Cho, 2011; Mooney et al., 2007), triggering higher levels of relationship conflict. We therefore hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 9: Task conflict has a negative indirect relationship with task performance through relationship conflict. Specifically, task conflict is positively related to relationship conflict, which is in turn negatively related to task performance.*

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedures**

To test our hypotheses, we draw on a dataset collected as part of a larger study, which assessed different aspects of leadership and performance in a nationally representative sample of organizations in Australia, excluding organizations with fewer than five employees and

those operating in agriculture, forestry, and fishery (Gahan et al., 2016). In total, the larger study collected data from 4,419 frontline leaders and employees from a variety of different workplaces. Organizational leaders were contacted and asked to distribute the survey among their employees and frontline leaders. Participation was voluntary, but in exchange for their participation, organizations have received a summary of the results. The larger study had a response rate of 6.6%, as around 67,000 frontline leaders and employees were invited to participate. We were able to match the first survey with another survey in which 2,538 senior managers from a variety of different workplaces participated. From every workplace, we received the response of a senior manager regarding the employees' role clarity. This survey of senior managers had a response rate of 72.3%.

To ensure accurate information – as well as reducing concerns about common method variance – surveys were administered to different informants in the workplace and subsequently matched. Employees reported on LEB, affective and cognitive trust, workload, and coworker conflict, while frontline leaders (direct supervisors of employees) reported on employees' task performance. The responses of both frontline leaders and employees were aggregated to the workplace level. Following previous research on aggregating employee responses to the workplace or workgroup level (e.g., Ambrose et al., 2013; Colquitt et al., 2002; Tracey & Tews, 2005), workplaces were only included if at least three employees and three frontline leaders provided responses. Applying this aggregation rule yielded the responses of 1,242 frontline leaders (38% female), 1,804 employees (32% female), and 317 senior managers (31% female) in 317 workplaces. These workplaces were located at 314 different organizations. Workplaces in our sample were represented by an average of 5.80 employee participants and four frontline leader participants.

## **Measures**

All variables were measured at the individual level and aggregated to the workplace level, as described in the Analysis and Results section below. Here we describe the measures as they were administered at the individual level. Study participants were asked to respond to items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) for the relationship and task conflict measures, and from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for all other measures. *LEB* was measured with a twelve-item scale developed by Ahearne and colleagues (2005). An item example is “My manager allows me to do my job my way.” The coefficient alpha for the scale was .94.

*Affective trust* was assessed with a five-item scale that was developed by Colquitt and colleagues (2012). An item example is “I can talk freely to my supervisor about difficulties I am having at work.” The coefficient alpha for the scale was .93. *Cognitive trust* was assessed with a six-item scale was developed by Colquitt and colleagues (2012). An item example is “My supervisor approaches his/her job with dedication.” The coefficient alpha was .93.

*Workload* was assessed with four items that were developed by Patterson and colleagues (2005). An item example is “People are expected to do too much in a day.” The coefficient alpha for the scale was .87. *Role clarity* was measured with three items developed by Sun et al. (2007). One senior manager in every workplace was asked to evaluate the clarity of employees’ roles. An item example is “The duties in each job are clearly defined.” The coefficient alpha for the scale was .77.

*Relationship conflict* and *task conflict* were each measured with three-item scales developed by Jehn and Mannix (2001). An example item for relationship conflict is “How often is there emotional conflict in your workgroup?” and the coefficient alpha for the scale was .94. An item example for task conflict is “How often do people in your workgroup have conflicting opinions about the project you are working on?” and the coefficient alpha for the scale was .91. *Employees’ task performance* was assessed with three items that were

developed by Schaubroeck, Lam, and Cha (2007) (e.g., “My direct reports get their work done very effectively”). The coefficient alpha for the scale was .96.

*Controls.* Finally, as we collected data from different organizations and industries, our analyses controlled for industry (using the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification [ANZSIC]), private versus public sector, and workplace age (how long the workplace has existed). In a *post hoc* analysis, we further controlled for workplace size (based on the number of employees). We included public versus private sector as control variable because one might assume that LEB is more common in the private sector than in the potentially more bureaucratic public sector. Workplace age was included because older workplaces may have had time to better establish organizational cultures and performance management systems to shape or manage conflict and social interactions among employees, reducing the influence of leaders on employees’ behaviors and attitudes. Newer workplaces could be characterized by different leadership, trust, and conflict dynamics (e.g., Blunsdon & Reed, 2003). As we collected data from a large variety of different organizations, we also included industry and size as control variables.

### **Analysis and Results**

In this study, we are interested in the average levels of LEB, trust, conflict, and performance. In line with the summary index model (Chen et al., 2004), we therefore aggregated employees’ responses to the workplace level. A summary index model does not assume any sharedness of the employees’ responses or any interdependence. It is therefore not necessary to analyze any aggregation indices such as  $r_{wg(j)}$ , ICC(1), or ICC(2)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Although a summary index model does not require sharedness or agreement to aggregate the data (Chen et al., 2004), we still report the aggregation indices in order to be transparent and to inform future research. We therefore evaluated whether agreement existed among employees (James, 1982). We calculated  $r_{wg(j)}$  for all variables, finding mean  $r_{wg(j)}$  values of .91 for LEB ( $SD = .17$ ), .79 for cognitive trust ( $SD = .29$ ), .71 for affective trust ( $SD = .32$ ), .80 for workload ( $SD = .18$ ), .77 for relationship conflict ( $SD = .23$ ), .84 for task conflict ( $SD = .17$ ), and .87 for employees’ task performance ( $SD = .17$ ). These values indicate that all

After that, we validated the measurement scales through confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus version 8. The model included eight variables: LEB, affective trust, cognitive trust, workload, role clarity, relationship conflict, task conflict, and employees' task performance. The model provided a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 (664) = 1470.65$ ; Tucker-Lewis fit index (TLI) = .95; comparative fit index (CFI) = .96; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .017; and standardized-root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = .059.

Table 1 shows means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among the variables. It shows high correlations of LEB with affective and cognitive trust. There are also significant negative correlations between both forms of trust and both forms of conflict. Due to the high correlation of LEB with both forms of trust, we conducted another confirmatory factory analysis in which we combined LEB and the trust dimensions into one "leadership" factor. However, the model fit was significantly worse than the hypothesized model ( $\Delta\chi^2 [13] = 448.46, p < .05$ ). Further, due to the high correlation between affective and cognitive trust ( $r = .80$ , Table 1), we combined both trust dimensions to test a model using "overall trust." However, the fit of this model to the data was also significantly worse ( $\Delta\chi^2 [7] = 149.37, p < .05$ ) than that of the hypothesized model. Similarly, due to the high correlation between

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variables may be appropriately aggregated to the workplace level as climate-like variables (George, 1990; George & James, 1993). We further examined intraclass coefficients for all variables: ICC(1) was .03 and ICC(2) was .20 for LEB, ICC(1) was .06 and ICC(2) was .34 for cognitive trust, ICC(1) was .03 and ICC(2) was .19 for affective trust, ICC(1) was .07 and ICC(2) was .65 for workload, ICC(1) was .11 and ICC(2) was .47 for relationship conflict, ICC(1) was .07 and ICC(2) was .35 for task conflict, and ICC(1) was .05 and ICC(2) was .24 for employees' task performance. The relatively low levels of ICC(1) and ICC(2) values may be due to the small workplace sizes in our sample (Bliese, 2000; Bliese et al., 2002), but considering the agreement scores above in conjunction with the conceptual logic for averaging individual scores, we have proceeded with our analyses. We also calculated the percentage of workplaces that had an  $r_{wg(j)}$  score of below .70, resulting in LEB at 4.7%, overall trust at 16.6%, cognitive trust at 17.3%, affective trust at 28.7%, workload at 13.2%, task conflict at 12.3%, relationship conflict at 21.9%, and task performance at 8.8%. These fairly low percentages suggest provided further confidence that the model and its constructs are appropriately conceptualized and operationalized at the workplace level.

relationship and task conflict, we also conducted another confirmatory factor analysis in which we combined both conflict types into one conflict factor. However, again, the model fit was significantly worse than that of the hypothesized model ( $\Delta\chi^2 [7] = 357.96, p < .05$ ). Finally, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis based on one overall factor for all items. The model fit was, yet again, significantly worse ( $\Delta\chi^2 [28] = 7513.64, p < .05$ ). We therefore retained the hypothesized model.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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To test our hypotheses, we applied structural equation modeling with latent variables using Mplus version 8. Analyzing moderation models with latent variables, Mplus does not provide traditional model fit statistics. To analyze the fit of our model, we therefore first analyzed model fit without moderation but including the direct effect of role clarity.

Further, as noted above, affective trust and cognitive trust demonstrated a high correlation ( $r = .80$ , Table 1), so to avoid multicollinearity problems, we tested our research model in two steps. First, we tested a model (Model 1) that included only affective trust. This model provided a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 (1065) = 2042.51$ ; TLI = .92; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .019; and SRMR = .066. Second, we tested a model (Model 2) that included only cognitive trust. This model also provided a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 (1116) = 2113.67$ ; TLI = .92; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .019; and SRMR = .065. The results of our analyses are presented in Figures 1 and 2. Additionally, we tested a model in which we combined both trust dimensions to a higher-order overall trust construct. The model fit did not show improvement:  $\chi^2 (1384) = 2724.66$ ; TLI = .91; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .020; and SRMR = .066. In addition, the results are very similar; the direction of the relationships and the significance level do not change. Acknowledging the theoretical distinction between affective and cognitive trust and following

previous trust research (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2012; Schaubroeck et al., 2011), we maintained the distinction in our model.

We also tested alternative models by including the direct effects of LEB on relationship conflict, task conflict, and task performance, as well as the direct effects of affective and cognitive trust and workload on performance. However, the model fit did not improve through adding direct LEB effects (Model 1:  $\Delta\chi^2 [3] = 7.42, p < .05$ ; Model 2:  $\Delta\chi^2 [3] = 1.74, p < .05$ ). Similarly, the relationships of affective and cognitive trust and workload with employees' task performance did not improve the model fit (Model 1:  $\Delta\chi^2 [2] = 2.98, p < .05$ ; Model 2:  $\Delta\chi^2 [2] = 2.55, p < .05$ ). We therefore retained the hypothesized model, which is also the more parsimonious model compared to the tested alternative models.

Finally, we analyzed models in which we switched affective trust and cognitive trust with LEB, given that some may argue that LEB would follow from trustful relationships. However, the alternative model with cognitive trust led to a higher chi-square ( $\Delta\chi^2 [0] = 43.85$ ) and worse model fit. The alternative model with affective trust led to a slightly higher chi-square ( $\Delta\chi^2 [0] = 1.29$ ) and similar model fit. Based on our theoretical arguments and these results, we maintained LEB as the starting point for our model.

As the results reported in Figures 1 and 2 show, the data analysis indicates support for most of our hypothesized relationships. Hypothesis 1 predicted positive relationships of LEB with affective and cognitive trust. Our analyses yielded significant path coefficients that indicated positive relationships between LEB and affective trust ( $\beta = .81, p < .01$ ; Confidence Interval (CI): .68 – .95) and between LEB and cognitive trust ( $\beta = .61, p < .01$ ; CI: .47 – .75), as hypothesized.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a U-curved relationship between LEB and workload. However, the path coefficient for the curvilinear relationship between LEB and workload was non-significant (Model 1:  $\beta = .11, p > .05$ ; CI: -.21 – .42; Model 2:  $\beta = .06, p > .05$ ; CI: -.24 –

.35). Our analyses also yielded a non-significant path coefficient for the direct linear relationship between LEB and workload (Model 1:  $\beta = -.18, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.36 - .01$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = -.18, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.36 - .01$ ).

To clarify the relationship between LEB and workload, we considered role clarity as a crucial moderator for the curvilinear relationship. Indeed, and in line with Hypothesis 3, the interaction term was significant (Model 1:  $\beta = -.68, p < .05$ ; CI:  $-1.23 - -.04$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = -.59, p < .05$ ; CI:  $-1.11 - -.069$ ). The plot of this interaction (Figure 3) indicates that LEB only reduces employees' workloads when employees have a clear role. In this case, there is an exponential decrease in employees' workload. In contrast, too much LEB increases employees' workloads when employees have an unclear role. In this case, employees' workloads first decrease with increasing LEB until a point, after which workload rises again.

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Insert Figure 3 about here  
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Hypotheses 4 and 5 posited negative relationships between both affective and cognitive trust and task and relationship conflict. The results suggest the hypothesized relationships are statistically significant and in the hypothesized direction (affective trust and relationship conflict:  $\beta = -.17, p < .05$ ; CI:  $-.31 - -.04$ ; affective trust and task conflict:  $\beta = -.33, p < .05$ ; CI:  $-.45 - -.22$ ; cognitive trust and relationship conflict:  $\beta = -.44, p < .01$ ; CI:  $-.60 - -.28$ ; and cognitive trust and task conflict:  $\beta = -.44, p < .01$ ; CI:  $-.61 - -.29$ ), indicating support for Hypotheses 4 and 5.

Further, Hypothesis 6 predicted a positive relationship between workload and both task and relationship conflict. The results suggest both hypothesized relationships were statistically significant and in the hypothesized direction (Model 1: workload and relationship conflict:  $\beta = .14, p < .01$ ; CI:  $.04 - .23$ ; and workload and task conflict:  $\beta = .13, p < .01$ ; CI:  $.03 - .23$ ; Model 2: workload and relationship conflict:  $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ; CI:  $.03 - .21$ ; and



workload and task conflict:  $\beta = .11, p < .05$ ; CI: .01 - .21), indicating support for this hypothesis.

Consistent with prior research, Hypothesis 7 stated that relationship conflict relates negatively to employees' task performance. Our analyses suggest that relationship conflict is indeed negatively related to task performance (Model 1:  $\beta = -.33, p < .05$ ; CI:  $-.59 - -.07$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = -.34, p < .01$ ; CI:  $-.60 - -.09$ ). In contrast, Hypothesis 8 proposed that task conflict relates positively to employees' task performance. This hypothesis was not supported. The link between task conflict and task performance is non-significant (Model 1:  $\beta = .23, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.18 - .64$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = .25, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.16 - .67$ ). However, Hypothesis 9 predicted that task conflict was expected to relate negatively to employees' task performance through relationship conflict. This indirect link was supported (Model 1:  $\beta = -.27, p < .05$ ; CI:  $-.50 - -.05$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = -.25, p < .05$ ; CI:  $-.44 - -.05$ ). We also tested if task conflict mediated the relationship between relationship conflict and task performance. However, this indirect relationship was non-significant (Model 1:  $\beta = .11, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.09 - .31$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = .12, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.08 - .33$ ), further providing support for our hypothesized model. Based on prior research (e.g. De Dreu, 2006), it could be that task conflict has curvilinear effects on outcomes. We therefore tested the curvilinear relationship between task conflict and performance. However, the regression coefficient for the curvilinear effect was non-significant (Model 1:  $\beta = .01, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-1.51 - 1.52$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = .05, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.65 - .75$ ).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For completeness, we also tested the indirect effects of LEB on performance. LEB relates positively to performance through increased cognitive trust and reduced relationship conflict ( $\beta = .09, p < .01$ ; CI:  $.03 - .15$ ) and through affective trust and relationship conflict ( $\beta = .05, p < .05$ ; CI:  $.003 - .089$ ). The indirect effects of LEB on performance through workload and relationship conflict (Model 1:  $\beta = .01, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.001 - .020$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = .01, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.001 - .023$ ) are non-significant. Finally, the curvilinear indirect effects of LEB on performance through workload and relationship conflict are non-significant at low ( $-1 SD$ ), medium (mean), and high ( $+1 SD$ ) levels of role clarity (Model 1,  $-1 SD$ :  $\beta = -.09, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.444 - .207$ , mean:  $\beta = -.11, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.558 - .261$ ,  $+1 SD$ :  $\beta = -.14, p > .05$ ; CI:  $-.65 - .75$ ).

### ***Post Hoc Analysis***

Our sample consists of some large workplaces with a large number of employees (average of 74 employees per workplace), so one may question whether it is reasonable to represent such workplaces with a relatively small number of employees (average of 5.8 employees and four supervisors per workplace). To address this potential concern, we conducted a *post hoc* analysis using a sub-sample in which we excluded large workplaces (i.e., those with more than 99 employees) to see if our results could be replicated. This analysis was therefore conducted using 256 workplaces in our sample. These supplemental analyses yielded results that were largely equivalent to the analyses of our full dataset reported above, with few exceptions. In the smaller sample, the direction of relationships and significance levels did not change for the model based on cognitive trust. However, in the model based on affective trust, the relationship between affective trust and relationship conflict only approached significance ( $\beta = -.13, p = .09$ ). Further, relationship conflict did not exhibit a significant effect on employees' task performance in either model (Hypothesis 4), though the nonsignificant estimate did retain a negative sign (Model 1:  $\beta = -.31, p > .05$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = -.33, p > .05$ ). Given that the estimates are not far from those produced by the full sample ( $\beta = -.17, p < .05$  for affective trust and relationship conflict;  $\beta = -.33, p < .05$  for relationship conflict and performance), this may be due simply to the reduced statistical power of having a smaller number of workplaces in the analysis. However, an alternative explanation is that these effects play out differently in smaller workplaces, where relationship conflict is perhaps mitigated and resolved regularly in preserving a "family" or "community" feel. Further research is required to achieve greater confidence in these effects and whether they play out differently in small versus large workplaces.

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.672 – .314; Model 2: -1 *SD*:  $\beta = -.03, p > .05$ ; CI: -.324 – .261, mean:  $\beta = -.04, p > .05$ ; CI: -.407 – .329, +1 *SD*:  $\beta = -.05, p > .05$ ; CI: -.491 – .390).

## **Discussion**

We have presented and tested a model that links LEB to relationship and task conflict – and ultimately employees’ task performance – via affective and cognitive trust and workload, with consideration of role clarity. Our study largely supported our hypotheses. We now discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings, the limitations of our study, and directions for future research in this area.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This study contributes to scholarship in at least three meaningful ways, as a theoretical and empirical investigation designed to enhance our understanding of (1) the role of leaders and LEB in influencing coworker conflict, (2) social exchange and the role of trust in linking LEB and conflict, and (3) the dark side of LEB through its impact on workload and the importance of role clarity. Our work also contributes to research about the impact of LEB on employees’ task performance and the intricate relationship between task conflict, relationship conflict, and employees’ task performance.

First, we developed and tested a model for understanding the influence of LEB on the emergence of coworker conflict. Conflict researchers generally posit a role for leadership in shaping coworker conflict dynamics, but with a limited evidence base to support this widely held view (Gelfand et al. 2012; Tjosvold, et al. 2014; Zhao et al., 2019). The paucity of empirical work on the role of leadership in shaping or reducing coworker conflict presents a major limitation in this area (Zhao et al., 2019) that requires an integrative and cumulative approach to the potentially very large body of research that could inform this topic. Drawing on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), we sought to more explicitly explore the role of leaders in shaping the types of coworker conflict and the consequences for employees’ task performance. Doing so allowed us to connect the concerns of conflict researchers to actual

organizational settings in which coworkers are interacting at an intra-group level, as well as with frontline leaders.

Relatedly, research on leadership has demonstrated that leadership is an important factor for employee performance (Burke et al., 2006; Morgenson et al., 2010). However, the mechanisms of leadership effects on workplace outcomes have not been explained in a precise way (Kozlowski et al., 2009; Schaubroeck et al., 2011; Zaccaro et al., 2001). We expand this research by adding affective and cognitive trust and coworker conflict as social exchange mechanisms through which leadership influences workplace dynamics. Through our findings, we add more precision and clarity to the integrative research on leadership and employees' performance. Most research on leadership and performance has also focused on transformational and servant leadership (Schaubroeck et al., 2011), neglecting LEB. We show that LEB is an important leadership tool that helps workplaces to reduce coworker conflict and to perform effectively.

Second, to further our understanding of how LEB and coworker conflict are linked, the current research suggests that an approach rooted in social exchange theory is useful in understanding the importance of affective and cognitive trust as mechanisms through which empowering leaders may influence coworker conflict and employees' task performance. From a social exchange perspective, employees try to reciprocate the trustful attitudes and behaviors of their empowering leaders by reducing their engagement in dysfunctional behavior (Colquitt et al., 2007), such as conflict, allowing them to improve their task performance. This means we also contribute to trust research that has identified affective and cognitive trust as important social exchange mechanisms (Colquitt et al., 2012; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Schaubroeck et al., 2011), helping to clarify the link between leadership and interactions among employees. Leaders must pay attention to how they are perceived by

their employees, as these perceptions not only influence leader-member relationships but also coworker relationships (Gelfand et al., 2012).

Consistent with prior research in related areas of ethical leadership (Mayer et al., 2009) and justice perceptions (Ambrose et al., 2013), our results suggest that leaders' attitudes and behaviors are transmitted to the employee level to influence attitudes and interactions among coworkers. We observed such transmission effects from empowering and trustful leaders as well as from workload. Empowering and trustful leaders create conditions for effective cooperation among employees (Gelfand et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2018). Our findings are therefore also in line with research on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which shows that individuals typically treat coworkers in ways similar to how they themselves have been treated by their leaders (Ambrose et al., 2013). Empowering and trustful leaders may motivate and inspire employees to treat each other with more respect, instead of engaging in dysfunctional conflict. This in turn is expected to have positive effects on employees' task performance. Employees could further try to model the interpersonal style of trustful leaders. In this way, employees could address their coworkers' concerns and reduce workgroup relationship and task conflict. Our findings are also consistent with functional leadership theory in the team context (Morgeson et al., 2010) and recent conflict management research (Gelfand et al., 2012), which suggest that effective leaders should support employees to manage their conflict in a cooperative way.

Third, to further our understanding of how levels of LEB and coworker conflict are linked, our results suggest that an approach based on the costs of empowerment and autonomy (Langfred, 2004; Lee et al., 2017) is useful in understanding the importance of workload as a mechanism through which empowering leaders may influence employees' attitudes and behaviors. By considering employees' role clarity, we further integrated the workplace context to better understand how LEB effects may unfold. We demonstrated that

employees' role clarity influences the degree to which leaders' attitudes and behaviors play a role in shaping perceptions of workload and coworker conflict. More specifically, LEB has only beneficial effects, when employees know their goals and what is expected from them. This means LEB is not a magic bullet (see also Cheong et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2017) and its effects depend on the work environment and whether the organization provides enough guidance and direction to employees. Our finding is in line with recent research that highlights the importance of considering competing effects of LEB on employee attitudes and behaviors, as well as potential boundary conditions (Cheong et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2017).

### **Practical Contributions**

Beyond these scholarly contributions, our findings provide actionable knowledge for HR professionals seeking to refine HR practices, design group work, and build requisite capabilities among frontline leaders supporting workgroups. We show that trustful and empowering leaders can help employees to reach their performance potential by reducing coworker conflict. Organizations therefore need to train leaders through their leadership development programs to exhibit empowering behaviors that foster trust among employees. Affective trust in leaders can be increased by helping leaders to improve their interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence, while cognitive trust in leaders can be enhanced by providing task-related training to improve leaders' competence. If employees perceive their leaders as trustful, they may also feel an obligation to pay back the leaders' positive attitudes and behaviors by engaging in less dysfunctional conflict to improve their performance. Thus, leaders need to be aware of such dynamics – that their attitudes and behaviors are transmitted to employees and influence their interactions with each other.

Further, our results show that LEB is not always beneficial for employees. Many practitioners believe that today's employees strive for more autonomy and freedom, leading them to consider LEB as the right leadership tool in today's complex and dynamic business

environment. However, our findings indicate that too much LEB can be counterproductive, in that it may be seen as creating additional burden on employees. Managers and organizations should be aware that they must support employees and create clear expectations in order to exploit the potential benefits of empowering leadership. Without role clarity, employees may well view LEB as another job demand, rather than a resource that motivates and enables them. Role clarity can be increased by providing employees with guidance and clear goals and objectives.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While we implemented a study design and analytical techniques to minimize the possibility of alternative explanations for our results, the study is not without its limitations. For example, one possible limitation of our study is the cross-sectional design and the inevitable concerns about common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We addressed this issue by asking employees and leaders to report on different variables in our research model. To minimize the effects of social desirability, we refrained from utilizing employees' self-reports of their performance. Instead, we asked leaders to evaluate employees' task performance. Employees, on the other hand, were asked to report on the behaviors and dynamics of their leaders and coworkers, to further reduce concerns about common method variance. We also asked senior managers to evaluate role clarity in the workplace.

Further, our theorizing is intended to build the case for the causal directions we have proposed, but it is possible that other explanations may be leveraged to argue for effects in other directions. As an extreme example, employees who are in underperforming workplaces may fall into conflict over why their performance is so low. These arguments may be personal, leading to relationship conflict, or they may surround aspects of the work itself (task conflict). Leaders may in turn decide to withhold LEBs from such high-conflict and low-performing workplaces in an effort to solve problems from the top down. We hold that in

comparison to such an alternative explanation, we have made a stronger *a priori* case based on established theory and empirical work. In addition, we have conducted a *post hoc* analysis to test this alternative model: Performance → relationship and task conflict → affective and cognitive trust, workload, role clarity, and interaction between workload and role clarity → LEB. In contrast to the results of testing our hypothesized model, many relationships were found to be non-significant. The effects of employees' task performance on relationship (Model 1:  $\beta = -.09, p > .05$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = -.10, p > .05$ ) and task conflict (Model 1:  $\beta = .03, p > .05$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = .03, p > .05$ ) were non-significant. Further, the effects of task conflict on workload (Model 1:  $\beta = .05, p > .05$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = .06, p > .05$ ) and cognitive trust ( $\beta = -.12, p > .05$ ) were also non-significant. Finally, workload (Model 2:  $\beta = -.06, p > .05$ ), the curvilinear effects of workload (Model 1:  $\beta = .01, p > .05$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = .01, p > .05$ ), role clarity (Model 1:  $\beta = -.02, p > .05$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = -.02, p > .05$ ) and their interactions (Model 1:  $\beta = .04, p > .05$ ;  $\beta = .08, p > .05$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = -.03, p > .05$ ;  $\beta = .14, p > .05$ ) did not relate significantly to LEB. This analysis provides further evidence for our hypothesized research model. However, further research, including experimental and longitudinal designs, would help to increase confidence in the causal arrows of our model.

Another avenue for future research will be to use a referent shift approach to measure LEB and trust and to conceptualize them as organizational climate variables.<sup>5</sup> We averaged employees' own perceptions of their own leaders, but another way to understand these workplace-level constructs would be to ask employees to evaluate more generally the relationships between leaders and employees in their workplaces. To address this potential issue, we conducted and reported on a *post hoc* analysis in which we tested our model among a sub-sample of small workplaces. The results remained very similar, providing confidence in our results and research design.

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<sup>5</sup> This would also likely result in higher ICC values than those noted in a previous footnote.



A possibility for future research would be to test our model in different countries and cultures. The role of leaders for coworker conflict may differ across cultures. In particular, the cultural value dimension of power distance may influence the role of leaders in shaping and reducing coworker conflict. Employees from high power distance cultures tend to accept and tolerate power and status differences between them and their leaders in the workplace (Hofstede, 2001). This means leaders usually have a higher status, and their behavior is likely to be more salient to employees. We can therefore expect stronger effects of leaders' attitudes and behaviors on coworker conflict in a high power distance culture. As Australia (the location of the present study) is considered a low power distance culture (Hofstede, 2001), a test of our research model in a high power distance culture is likely to provide stronger empirical support for our hypotheses.

Finally, the current research focused on LEB and affective and cognitive trust. Future research can expand our integrative research on leadership and coworker conflict by including other leadership styles. Research can consider the effects of servant or transformational leadership (Schaubroeck et al., 2011), or the conflict management approach of the leaders (De Dreu & Weingart, 2008; Tjosvold et al., 2014). In addition to affective and cognitive trust, future research could also integrate other social exchange mechanisms, such as leader-member exchange or affective commitment. An interesting avenue for future research might also be the integration of the dark side of leadership (e.g., abusive supervision) into coworker conflict research (Zhao et al., 2018).

### **Conclusion**

Coworker conflict research tends to neglect the role of leaders, while leadership research tends to neglect the role of leaders in managing or influencing conflict. Through our study, we show that integrating research on LEB, workload, and conflict allows for a richer understanding of these constructs and of social exchange-related workplace dynamics and

their outcomes more generally. Organizations must often deal with conflict among employees. In particular, relationship conflict can have not only dysfunctional effects on the work atmosphere but also on task performance. We illustrated that leaders can play an important role in reducing coworker conflict. It is therefore important that organizations cultivate trustful and empowering leaders, and that organizations provide clear role descriptions to their employees. In this way, LEB can have beneficial effects regarding workload, conflict, and performance.

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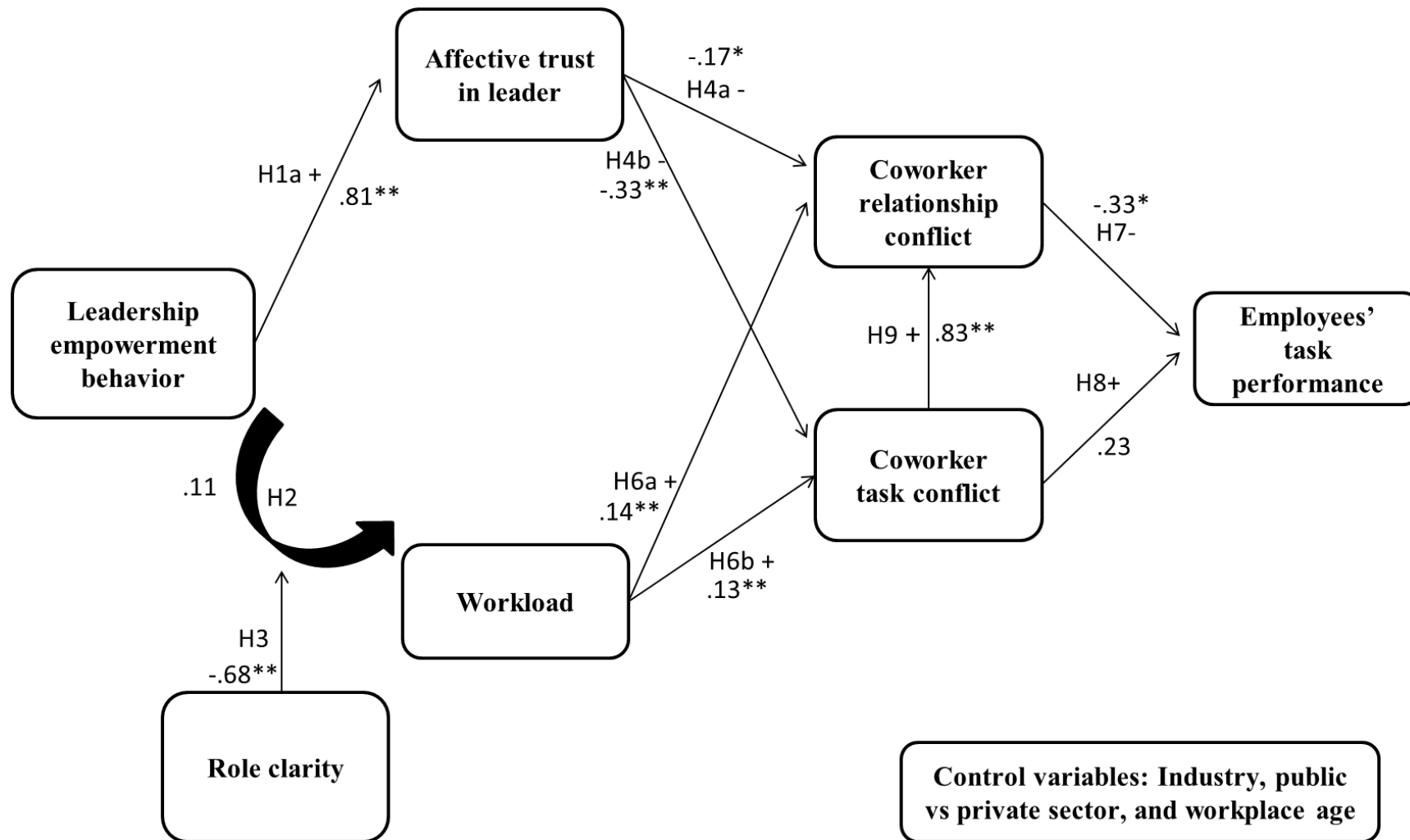


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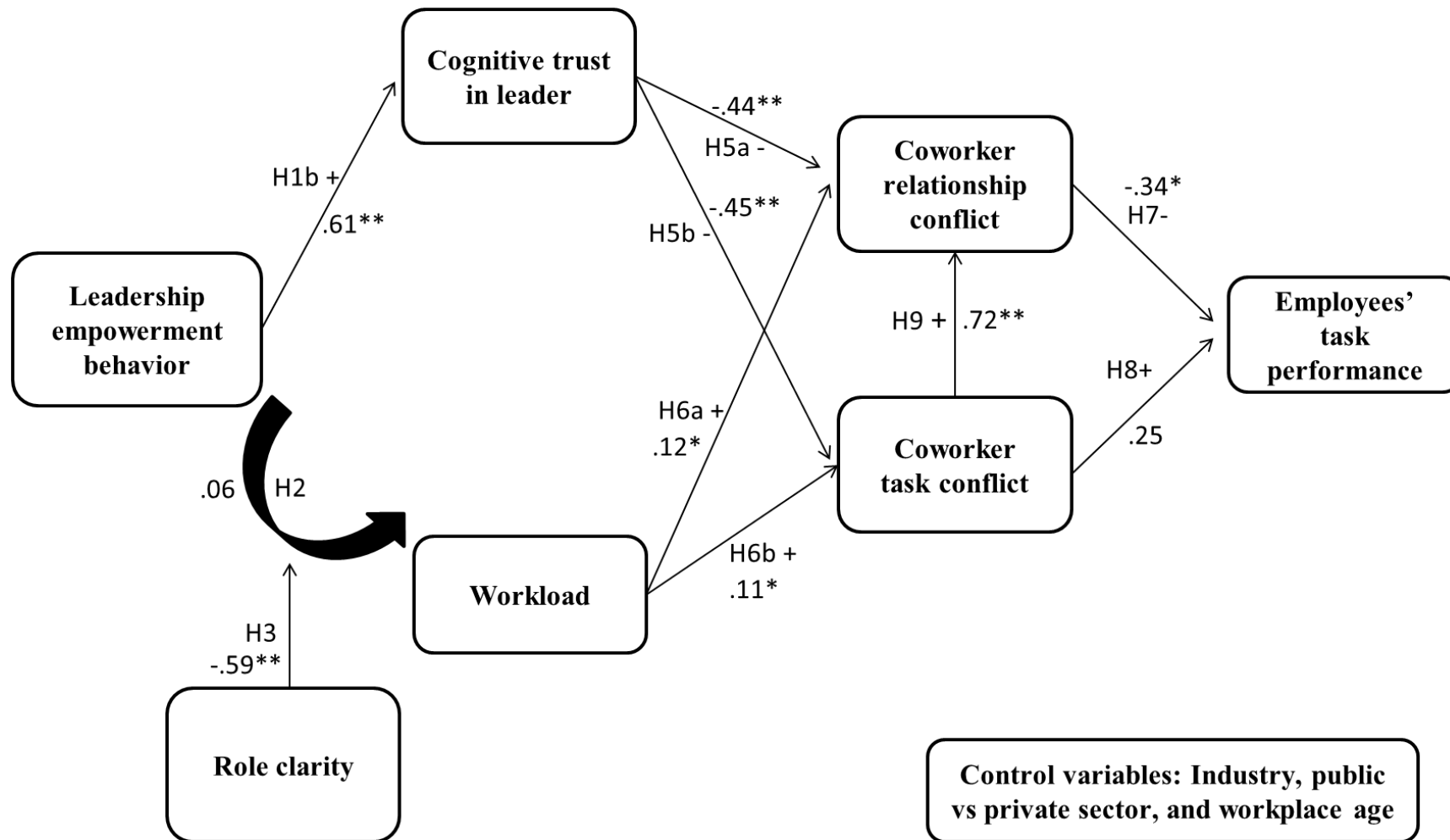
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**Figure 1.** Research Model and Analysis for Model 1.



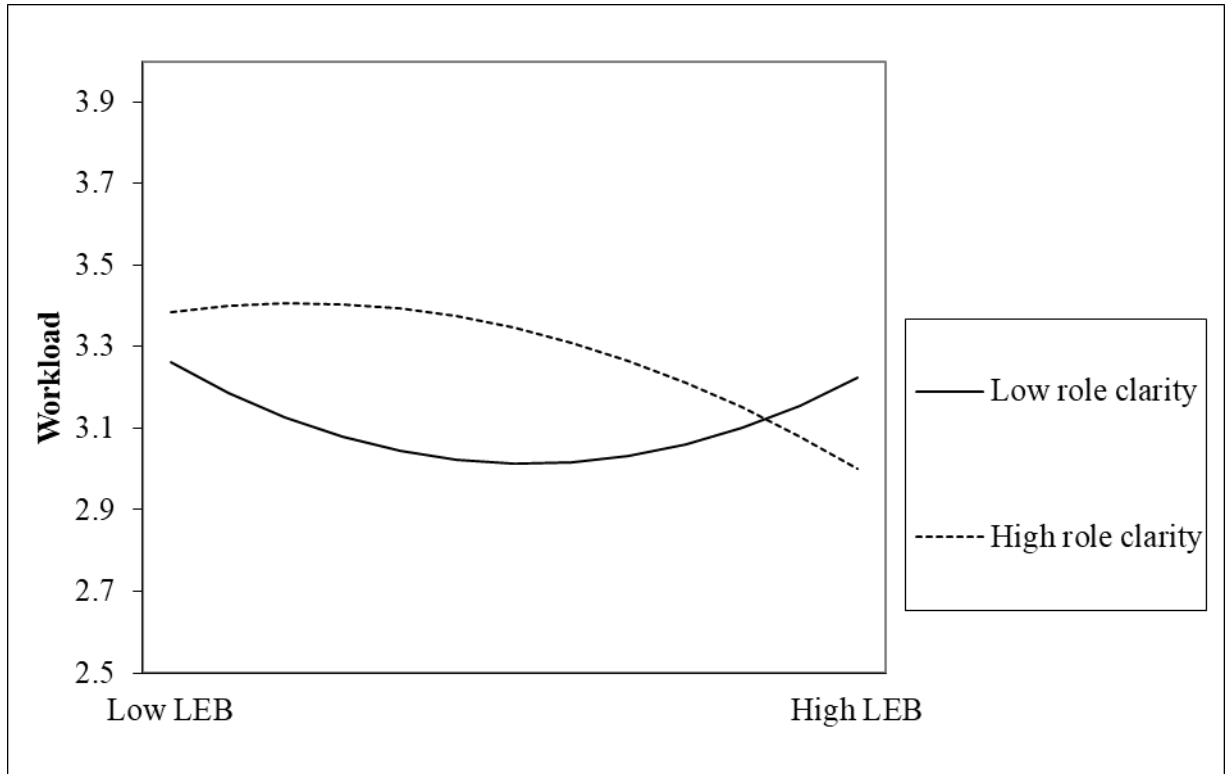
*Note.* This model includes only affective (and not cognitive) trust. Values are unstandardized regression coefficients.  
 $** p < 0.01$ ,  $* p < 0.05$ .

**Figure 2.** Research Model and Analysis for Model 2.



*Note.* This model includes only cognitive (and not affective) trust. Values are unstandardized regression coefficients.  
 $^{**} p < 0.01$ ,  $^* p < 0.05$ .

**Figure 3.** Moderation of Role Clarity on the Relationship between LEB and Workload.



**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Cronbach Alphas.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Workplace age (in years)	5.47	1.66										
2. Private (=0) versus public (=1) sector	0.18	0.39	.16**									
3. Leadership empowerment behavior	3.68	0.39	-.01	-.02	(.94)							
4. Workload	3.18	0.62	.04	.13**	-.22**	(.86)						
5. Relationship conflict	2.52	0.55	-.01	-.01	-.44**	.26**	(.94)					
6. Task conflict	2.44	0.44	.00	.04	-.38**	.21**	.70**	(.91)				
7. Employee performance	3.95	0.59	-.06	.10	.04	-.04	-.12	-.03	(.96)			
8. Role clarity	4.00	0.82	.01	.06**	.03	.07	.03	.08	.10*	(.77)		
9. Affective trust	3.77	0.58	.07	.00	.81**	-.12	-.40**	-.37**	.17*	.04	(.93)	
10. Cognitive trust	4.04	0.57	.04	-.04	.74**	-.17**	-.57**	-.44**	.19*	.01	.82**	(.93)

*Note.* N = 317. We also controlled for industry by using 18 industry dummy variables based on the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC). To improve the readability of the correlation table, we excluded these variables. The full correlation table with all industry control variables is available from the first author. Reliabilities (coefficient alpha) appear in parentheses on the diagonal.

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\* $p < 0.05$ .



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